

# Baseball as a Framework for the Study of American History, Culture & Language

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Tsurumi University is known for its strong baseball program, with students coming from all over Japan to study at Tsurumi University while playing on the school baseball team. In the 2014 school year, there were 89 undergraduate students who were members of the baseball team, of which 42 were from the English Department. With student enrollment always a concern, it is likely that the recruitment office at Tsurumi University will continue to reach out to high school baseball players looking to continue playing their favorite sport as they pursue higher education. It makes sense, then, to offer courses that will appeal to baseball players that simultaneously further the goals of English education, such as an ESL course that links baseball to American history and culture. Designing such a course, however, must take into account various English proficiency levels, including levels that are near beginner level. Simply lecturing about baseball, history and culture in English would certainly not succeed, and doing so in Japanese would be unlikely to further the goals of English language education. However, a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) course in English about baseball and culture that features active learning and cooperative learning methods can succeed in furthering the aims of

language learning and cultural understanding while serving as a potent recruitment tool.

To those who are skeptical of the worthiness of baseball as an academic subject, it may be pointed out that the idea of a course on baseball and how it relates to American history, culture and other disciplines is not a new concept. Many American universities offer such courses, including the University of Chicago (History 28703: Baseball and American Culture, 1840-Present), Northern Illinois University (Political Science 314: Law, Politics and Baseball) and State University of New York (Economics 383-800: The Economics of Baseball), among others (see Appendix A). Baseball is an obvious springboard for culture and history discussions because it has immediate relevance to many people as a pastime or spectator sport, yet it continually evokes the past, with references to players that came before and the eras they played in. It's a convenient entry way into discussion of the American history of racism and segregation, for example, to talk about the Negro Leagues and how talented black players were prevented from participating in the major leagues in the early 20th century. When Jackie Robinson broke the "color barrier" in 1947, the reaction by the media and spectators helped to pave the way for desegregation in other walks of American life. These are stories worth telling, and the fortunate combination of baseball lore, American history, and abundant media resources make it an ideal area for university study.

This paper will present a model for teaching baseball as a content course in English to Japanese students that ties people and events from American baseball to the eras in which they occurred. The course will provide a window into American history and culture while appealing to those students who already have an interest in baseball and wish to know more. It will introduce historical and cultural aspects of American

life while providing opportunities to listen to native English from real sports and news media clips. It will also exercise the productive skills of speaking and writing as students share information in cooperative learning formats and in making presentations about players and historical events. It will stimulate thoughtful comparisons with Japanese baseball, creating entry ways into topics of comparative culture. Moreover, it will comply with the Tsurumi University Bungaku-bu FD Iinkai's call for more Active Learning in classes in the Faculty Development Kouenkai of Nov. 8, 2012.

### **Topics for a One-Semester Course**

The first step in presenting content material that links American history, culture and baseball is to identify the key people, events and stories that may appeal to students and entice them to want to learn more. If possible, the connection between baseball and the historical event should be natural and unforced. Often the baseball story will provide the hook that generates student interest, and the historical background will be provided to give the story its context and help students understand the motivations of the people involved. As an example, one can point to the importance to Japanese "Nisei" of baseball while they were interned in camps in several western states, such as California, Arizona and Wyoming, during World War II.

A moving true story, which is available free on YouTube video ("Baseball Behind Barbed Wire"), is told of the 1945 meeting between the Nisei team, the Butte High Eagles, against the best high school team in Arizona, the Tucson Badgers. The Eagles were made up of young interned ethnic Japanese-American boys, who all lived behind barbed wire in the internment camp called the Gila River War Relocation

Center. The Badgers were two-time high school state champions and were on a 52-game winning streak. Their pitcher, Lowell Bailey, had a perfect 0.00 ERA. The teams met on the baseball field at the relocation center, as the Nisei team was unable to travel outside of their camp. The game went back and forth, with the Badgers taking the lead three times. Finally, in the 10<sup>th</sup> inning, with the score tied 10-10, an Eagles player, Harvey Zenimura, batted in the winning run, and the Nisei team defeated the favored Badgers 11-10 (Alameda, 2010). Interestingly, the winning hitter, Zenimura, was the son of Kenichi Zenimura, born in Hiroshima, and also interned at the camp. Kenichi Zenimura had been a semi-pro baseball player in California and had played in exhibition games against New York Yankee great, Lou Gehrig, and was instrumental in bringing Babe Ruth and Negro League All-Star players to Japan on “barnstorming tours” in the years before World War II (Staples, 2011). This story of baseball in a Japanese-American internment camp can then segue into discussion of Pearl Harbor and the rationale behind the camps, and then perhaps to discussion of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, made up entirely of Japanese-Americans and the most decorated infantry force in the history of the U.S. Army, that fought with great distinction in Europe during World War II.

While some historical baseball stories are not as dramatic as the one above, each era in American history has its connection to baseball. A hypothetical weekly progression of content for a 14-week course on “Baseball in American History and Culture” might be as follows:

1. An introduction to baseball, American history and how baseball spread to Japan and other parts of the world.
2. Introduction to the origins of baseball in America and what America was like in the 18th century; the Colonial Era and the

American Revolution.; the Star Spangled Banner (America's national anthem) and its connection to baseball; also the American Civil War and how the movement of American troops brought baseball to most areas of the continental U.S.

3. Baseball heroes in the early days of professional baseball and the culture of their time to 1920; focus on player Ty Cobb and on his contemporary, U.S. Pres. Theodore Roosevelt, with mention of Roosevelt's successful negotiation of an end in 1905 to the Russo-Japanese War, for which he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, as well as on his efforts to restrict Japanese immigration to the U.S.
4. The "Black Sox" scandal, i.e., the fixing of the 1919 World Series; the culture of Chicago politics and organized crime; Babe Ruth, the Roaring Twenties, Prohibition and the Great Depression.
5. European immigration to the U.S.; Italian and Irish immigrants and their baseball heroes—Joe DiMaggio, Yogi Berra (Italian); John McGraw, Connie Mack (Irish) among others.
6. The Negro Leagues and American segregation; Satchel Paige, arguably the best pitcher of all time, who spent most of his career in the Negro Leagues, and who only played against whites in exhibition games until he was finally allowed to join the MLB at the age of 42, making him the oldest rookie in major league baseball history.
7. Baseball during World War II and the players who served in the military on the American and Japanese sides; women in baseball
8. Japanese-American internment camps; baseball in the internment camps; Kenichi Zenimura, the father of Japanese-

- American baseball; the 442nd Regimental Combat Team of Japanese-Americans who fought in Europe
9. American geopolitics in the Caribbean and Central America and the new wave of Latin American baseball players
  10. Jackie Robinson and baseball's racial integration; the Civil Rights movement
  11. Baseball heroes during the Cold War; the Cuban Missile Crisis and Cuban baseball
  12. The modern era of baseball heroes and consumer culture; baseball in movies and on TV; steroids in baseball and other sports
  13. The movement of players from the U.S. to Japan and Japan to the U.S.; U.S./Japan relations in the 90s and 2000s; the international game of baseball; the World Baseball Classic; why baseball hasn't caught on in Europe
  14. Course summary and comparisons between American and Japanese baseball and baseball culture

### **Presenting Course Content in English**

Having identified many topics that are relevant to both baseball and American history, and with several that also have a Japanese connection, it remains to show how this material can be presented in an engaging way for English learners. Fortunately, the abundance of materials available in written and video form, and the easy access to much of this material online, make the task easier than with many other historical subjects. Bio.com is a site that provides biographical information on sports heroes and historical figures in both written and video form. YouTube as well offers thousands of hours of relevant video clips. The

Ken BurnsDVD series, “Baseball,” which covers the history of baseball in American, is an essential source of visually stimulating material, though it must be purchased from the U.S. and presented on a region one DVD player. With these videos in hand, the task would be to follow the common procedures of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning). A typical class might proceed as follows.

Topic: Baseball during WWII; events from the WWII era, on and off the field	
Class Activity	Rationale
Begin by asking students what they know about World War II—famous people, incidents, places, and rough dates, and what they know about professional baseball, American or Japanese, from around that era.	Questions and answers are in English. The purpose is to identify some central figures and events and activate background knowledge.
Put people, places and events on a timeline, linking historical WWII information to baseball eras and events in the U.S. and Japan. The teacher may do this on the board or with a slideshow, while students do it on a graphic organizer handout. Relevant vocabulary for the video activity to follow will come out at this time.	Use of a graphic organizer, such as a timeline, helps to consolidate information. It gives students a chance to spell relevant words and to see visually how people and events relate to each other in time. Some vocabulary is learned as preparation for the activities to follow.
Present short authentic video clips that relate specifically to some of the events and people mentioned in the introductory activity. Short question/answer time to check for understanding.	Videos are first presented with no script or subtitles to give students a chance to try and understand the English audio. Question/answer time will help them understand better.
Short video cloze activities are used to help students access detailed information from the videos, including necessary vocabulary.	Use of a cloze exercise helps students understand the details of the topic, while repetition of the audio enforces listening comprehension. Writing the words in the blanks improves spelling and vocabulary.

Discussion and expansion of ideas and information presented in the videos.	Given the time constraints of a CLIL learning situation, information is presented in limited quantities, but the content that is presented should be understood by students.
The teacher identifies a grammar or usage point relevant to the material presented, such as contrasting active and passive cases in sentences. For example, “The U.S. Government placed ethnic Japanese citizens in internment camps during WWII” vs. “Ethnic Japanese citizens were placed in internment camps during WWII by the U.S. Government.” A short grammar exercise may be introduced.	Grammar and language development is integrated with content learning in a CLIL course. A clear understanding of the grammar involved aids in understanding the content at hand, but also transfers to other English study areas.
Additional activities as time permits or instead of the video activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Dictogloss</li> <li>● Jigsaw</li> <li>● Presentations</li> <li>● Pair and Group Work</li> </ul>	While there are many engaging and relevant videos dealing with both baseball and American history, not every class need stick to the video presentation model. The activities at left are discussed in detail below, as well as how they fit into the Flipped Classroom.
Quizzes with matching exercise, fill-in-the-blanks, and short answer questions are done at the end of each class to check comprehension and provide grades. Homework may also be assigned.	Quizzes for grades provide additional reinforcement of content and encourage students to focus their attention in subsequent classes.

The following activities are among the active learning techniques to be used when time permits or in place of the sample lesson above. These activities, of course, may be used with any type of content course, and are not restricted to the presentation of baseball material. (Not



covered in this section are assessments or homework, both of which would be part of this course.)

**Dictogloss**—Dictogloss is a listening comprehension and writing activity useful in the presentation of content material. The teacher introduces the topic, then reads a short paragraph that includes relevant information on the topic. After one reading, the students are asked to tell the class any ideas they caught in the reading. The teacher will repeat these utterances in correct English. During a second reading of the passage, students are asked to write down any key words they hear. These words are then listed on the board. After a third or fourth reading, additional information is stated aloud by students and added to the information on the board. Finally, students are asked to try, to the best of their ability, to duplicate the paragraph, including all relevant information. The words and sentences need not match perfectly with the original, but the essential information from the paragraph should appear in the student writing. Ultimately, the teacher may show the students the original passage so they can compare their own writing to the original.

**Re-tell It; video (plus reading) turn-taking activities**—Two short video clips are selected on related topics, or a slightly longer clip is divided into two parts. The class is divided in half, and one half watches a video clip while the other half of the class reads a short article. After the first group is finished watching the video, the second half of the class watches their video. Again, the other half of the class is reading a short article based on their own topic while this is going on. After both halves have seen their separate videos and read their related articles, the teacher removes the articles from their possession, and the students share their information in English with their partner and fill out a worksheet on

their combined material. Students are encouraged to ask questions of each other to fill in as many details as possible. The retelling of the information is usually followed by a short quiz or a written exercise to check for comprehension. After the quiz or extension activity is finished, both video clips may be played again to the whole class so students can see for themselves what their partner was trying to communicate.

**Jigsaw**—Jigsaw activities are a staple of Cooperative Learning and Task-Based Learning and figure heavily in CLIL courses. They emphasize learning of content while exercising presentation skills and communication between students and groups. The steps in a jigsaw activity are as follows:

- 1) The teacher selects material to be presented, and divides it into roughly equal, manageable chunks of information numbering 6-8. For example, in a unit on WWII and baseball in that era, the focus may be on short biographies of relevant people, such as Adolf Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt, Gen. Hideki Tojo, Gen. Douglas MacArthur, Emperor Hirohito, as well as Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio (famous major league stars who served in the military during WWII), and Shinichi Ishimaru, a Japanese pro-baseball player who flew to his death in a kamikaze raid in 1944 (Whiting, 2009).
- 2) The class is divided into as many groups as there are chunks of information (6-8); in this case, biographies. These groups are called Expert Groups. Each Expert Group is a mixed level group in terms of English language proficiency.
- 3) Each Expert Group temporarily has access to one biography, i.e., all members of a single group have the same biography.

Students are expected to a) understand the information in the biography, b) make sure all members of the group understand it, and c) be able to present the information to others. The term Expert refers to the fact that each person in this group is now an expert on the biography assigned to their group. High proficiency students are supposed to help low-proficiency students understand the material. The teacher also assists with this by going from group to group.

- 4) To prepare to present to others, students are allowed to write key English words on a separate piece of paper. In some cases, hard to remember details may be written in Japanese, but no English sentences may be copied from the original biography.
- 5) After a set amount of preparation time, the original teacher-submitted biographies are removed from the groups. The Expert Groups are then broken up and formed into Presentation Groups, with each Presentation Group having one member from each of the original Expert Groups. Because class numbers usually do not work out perfectly, some of the Presentation Groups will likely lack one or two Experts, or have two Experts for the same biography.
- 6) Students take turns presenting their biographical information to their Presentation Groups in English. Students in the Presentation Groups take notes on what they hear. They are encouraged to ask each other questions to confirm understanding of the material.
- 7) When students have finished presenting, the teacher will ask questions to confirm understanding. If some groups lack information because they didn't have all Experts assigned to their group, or because some presentations lacked sufficient

details, the teacher will ask one Expert on that topic to quickly present his or her information to the class.

- 8) As an end-of-activity assessment, students are dispersed and given a short quiz on all the biographies, with students allowed to look at their own notes.

By repeating Jigsaw activities several times during a semester, students learn that they must pay attention to what other students are presenting because they will be quizzed on their understanding. They also learn that they are responsible for accurately supplying information to other students. These factors combine to encourage student focus on the material and the task.

**Presentations**—Students may be assigned topics to present to the class, preferably as a slideshow presentation with visually compelling media that support understanding. While students make presentations, the rest of the students take notes on a handout or graphic organizer. Quizzes may be given on presented material. Students may also be asked to write quiz questions on their own presented material.

**Pair Work and Group Work**—With time and effort, content material can be organized into information gap pair and group work that students communicate to each other. As an example of a group activity, a board game can be created with pictures of famous people from WWII and baseball heroes from the era on a game board that goes in a loop, like Monopoly. Individual cards can be created with one fact about each person, with three fact cards created for each person. Students in a group of 3 or 4 use dice and proceed around the game board. They have a set number of fact cards in their hand. Each time they land on a famous

person, if they have a fact card for that person, they share their fact with the group and lay the card down. If they land on a space with no famous person, they must draw another fact card. The object is to go around the game board and get rid of all the fact cards. Students should ask the teacher for explanation when a fact is not understood. In any case, at the end of the activity, information should be consolidated by the teacher with the whole class. Quizzes may be given to verify comprehension.

**The Flipped Classroom**—The Flipped Classroom is a current buzzword in education at all levels. It aims to reverse the cycle of classroom lecture and homework by having students get their input at home, usually by use of videos, such as those available at Khan Academy (<http://www.khanacademy.org/>). Students then spend their time in class doing exercises and pair or group work based on the input they received at home. Teachers do not lecture in class, but work with individuals and groups on class work. The idea is that students do not always attend to class lectures, but at home, they can watch the lectures when and as often as they like. They are more likely to be active in class with the teacher and peers attending to what they produce. While there may be some drawbacks to this model, content courses in Japan lend themselves to at least a partial implementation of the technique.

For the purpose of the Baseball in American History and Culture class, a limited version of the Flipped Classroom can be implemented. Short videos can be assigned to watch outside of class and supplemental materials that support the videos can be posted on the teacher's website. The videos can be assigned to be viewed by a certain date. Various activities can then be implemented that build on the students' knowledge of the video content, such as mini presentations, jigsaw activities, and information gap pair work and group work.

## **Conclusion**

Many university teachers have found it difficult in recent years to fully engage students in traditional lecture classes, even when teaching to students in their native language. Students have many distractions, such as text messages, social media, and the Internet now available on cell phones, and are often reluctant to pay attention in class for extended periods of time. Teaching content in English to non-native speakers is even more challenging and requires a variety of active learning methods to keep students focused on the learning tasks at hand. The techniques and activities presented in this paper, combined with the compelling subject matter of baseball lore and American history available on video, offer a means to keep students engaged in learning both content and language. Use of dictogloss, video turn-taking, jigsaw activities, presentations, pair work, group work and the flipped classroom are several ways practitioners of active learning keep students on task and involved. With baseball as a framework for American studies, students will have an opportunity to engage in a topic that is personally meaningful to them while taking steps toward improved language proficiency and achieving a greater understanding of American history and culture. Such a course would contribute to Tsurumi University's recruitment efforts while complying with the FD Iinkai's call for greater use of Active Learning.

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**Appendix A** - partial list of American university courses devoted to baseball and its connection to history, culture and other disciplines; from a Google keyword search of "baseball" "culture" and "syllabus."

**Bellevue University, NE**

History 384: **Baseball and the American Experience**

<http://www.bellevue.edu/courses/content/pdfs/syllabi/HI%20384.pdf>

**DePauw University, IN**

History 197C - FYS: **Baseball History**

<http://www.depauw.edu/academics/departments-programs/history/courses/syllabiarchive/>

**Fresno Pacific University, CA**

Social Studies 970: **Baseball as American Culture**

<http://ce.fresno.edu/cpd/syllabus/soc970.pdf>

**George Mason University, VA**

Sports Management 321: **America Through Baseball**

<http://cehd.gmu.edu/courses/SPMT-321>

**Kansas State University, KS**

History 524: **The History of Baseball in American Culture**

[http://catalog.k-state.edu/preview\\_course\\_nopop.php?catoid=13&coid=69691](http://catalog.k-state.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=13&coid=69691)

**New York University, Gallatin School of Individualized Study, NY**

Interdisciplinary Seminar 1324: **Baseball as a Road to God**

<http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/courses/detail.SP2012.IDSEM-UG1324.001.html>

**Northern Illinois University, IL**

Political Science 314: **Law, Politics & Baseball**

<http://www.niu.edu/polisci/courses/sp14syllabi/POLS%20314%20Syllabus%20S2014-Ward.pdf>

**Ohio University, OH**

History 319B: **American Baseball to 1930**

[http://www.catalogs.ohio.edu/preview\\_course\\_nopop.php?catoid=19&coid=91928](http://www.catalogs.ohio.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=19&coid=91928)

History 319C: **American Baseball since 1930**

[http://www.catalogs.ohio.edu/preview\\_course\\_nopop.php?catoid=12&coid=51625](http://www.catalogs.ohio.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=12&coid=51625)

**Pennsylvania State University, PA**

History 113: **Baseball in Comparative History**

<http://bulletins.psu.edu/undergrad/courses/H/HIST/113>

**Salisbury University, MD**

Mathematics 103: **Statistics Through Baseball**

<http://www.salisbury.edu/mathcose/curricul.html>

**State University of New York, Oswego, NY**

Economics 383-800: **The Economics of Baseball**

<http://www.oswego.edu/~dighe/baseball.htm>

**Texas State University, TX**

History 3368Q: **History of Professional Baseball, 1869-1994**

<http://www.txstate.edu/history/people/faculty/atchison.html>



**University of Chicago, IL**

History 28703-01: **Baseball and American Culture, 1840-Present**

[https://history.uchicago.edu/sites/history.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/](https://history.uchicago.edu/sites/history.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/UC.Baseball.syllabus.12.pdf)

[UC.Baseball.syllabus.12.pdf](https://history.uchicago.edu/sites/history.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/UC.Baseball.syllabus.12.pdf)

**University of North Carolina, NC**

Library & Information Studies 460: **Baseball**

<http://uislis460.blogspot.jp/p/course-syllabus.html>

**University of Texas, TX**

English 3300-002: **Baseball and Writing**

<http://www.uta.edu/english/tim/courses/3300s09/3300main.html>